

## **Antarctic Peninsula Mammal Report – Summer 2025/26**

Confirmed sighting across the summer season on the Antarctic Peninsula.

I work as an expedition guide for Quark Expeditions and the following report contains mammal sightings from the 11 expeditions I was on this season from November 2025 through to March 2026. These were onboard the Ocean Explorer and the World Explorer which typically complete 11-day Antarctic Peninsula trips from Ushuaia, Argentina across the Drake Passage to the Gerlache Straight area of the Antarctic Peninsula which may include an excursion at the South Shetlands. Some of the expeditions were fly-in cruises (or one-way fly, one-way sail cruises) which are shorter in length and do not include the 2-day Drake Crossing. These start and/or end on King George Island in the South Shetlands. The fly-in cruises typically have very similar 4-days' worth of excursions on the Peninsula to the typical 11-day expeditions (when weather allows the planes to land on schedule), but obviously tend to miss the mammals that inhabit the Drake Passage and the Beagle Channel.



*Type B Orca hunting a Gentoo Penguin, Gerlache Straight*

I hope that this information will give mammal watchers a good idea of the

sightings across an entire season and when the best times are to visit the peninsula are, in order to maximise the chances of seeing certain mammals. I have also provided information about the key locations to look out for certain mammals. It must be acknowledged that the locations that are visited by all of the expedition ships are ultimately decided by the weather, captain and expedition leaders, so unless you are the leader of a charter trip you are unlikely to have a say in the places you will get to land or zodiac cruise.

Typically the weather (wind, waves, ice, visibility) decides where the best locations to visit are. There is also a very competitive IAATO booking system that the major expedition companies use to book certain sites (sometimes months ahead of time) to ensure that only one ship is in each location at a time which can limit the site choices as well. This information is based off my own experience this season and may not necessarily apply to future Antarctic seasons.

All of these sightings were confirmed by expedition guides and/or guest photos, these sightings are a collection of all the sightings seen onboard, I personally saw about 95% of these sightings. Of course it would be impossible to see all the sightings as it is not possible to be on the observation decks all the time and during excursions all the zodiac boats split up to maximise the chances of rarer encounters.



*Two younger Orca learning how to catch a penguin, Gerlache Straight*

I would definitely advise that the forward observation deck is typically the best place to see mammals, but the aft observation deck can also be really productive in poor conditions. I will also say it definitely helps a lot to choose an expedition company that really focusses and values wildlife spotting as part of the expedition. For example at Quark we typically always have a guide stationed on the observation deck or the bridge on wildlife spotting duties so if something is spotted and it's likely a lot of guests will have time to see it, it will be announced on the PA to everyone. But again, if you want to see something rare, like a beaked whale, you should probably be on the observation deck as much as possible as these mammals are unlikely to be around long enough for an announcement to be made.

Highlights from this season included sightings of type A Orca in the Gerlache Straight, B2 Orca hunting gentoo penguins, multiple sightings of Leopard Seals capturing penguins, three pods of beaked whales in the Drake Passage as well as multiple sightings of Burmeister's Porpoise in the Beagle Channel.

There is quite a difference in the number of whale and seal species that are seen throughout the season. I personally think that February would be the optimal time to get the best mammal sightings and the highest abundance (while still maintaining a decent amount of daylight). This is also when penguins are finishing their nesting and some will still have young chicks.

### Overview by Species

Typically the humpback whale numbers build throughout the season and peak around the end of Feb and early March. Although they were seen in decent numbers even in November this season. It is also important to note that the whales are typically more active, playful and curious at the end of the season, with more breaching, approaching the ship and active bubble feeding in the late season. This typically coincides with the darker/longer nights which bring the krill closer to the surface. Humpbacks are generally seen around the Peninsula in the bays close to land, but can be seen in huge numbers in the Drake Passage in November whilst they are still migrating south. Occasionally a few are also seen in the Beagle Channel.



*Humpback Whale, Gerlache Strait*

For Fin whales, the best place to them is in deeper water around the South Shetland Islands, they can also be seen in middle of the Drake (in early season) or in the Bransfield Channel. Blue Whales can be seen in these same areas as well but are very rare and none were seen on the expeditions I was on this season.

Sei whales (as well as Dusky and Peale's Dolphins) are typically seen in the Beagle Channel throughout the season, with a definite late season peak for Sei Whales in February and March. Sometimes they can even been seen in high numbers from the port in Ushuaia. However most of the Sei whales are typically seen around the mouth of the Beagle during the last hour or two of exiting the Beagle Channel on the first evening. So it is important to note that in November and March it is often too dark to see them since most of the ships leave port around 6pm and only get to the mouth of Beagle once its dark. The return journey North through this part of the Beagle Sea is typically in the early hours of the morning (1-4am) to get into the Ushuaia port around 8am, so no viewing is possible. For prime dolphin viewing of Peales and Dusky Dolphins it is optimal to be on a ship that has a X-bow (inverted bow, e.g., Ocean Explorer) that can be viewed from the observation deck as they love to bow ride and with most ships you cannot view the bow at the waterline.



*Peale's Dolphin bow riding, Beagle Channel*

Minke Whales are generally seen around the bays on the peninsula or around the South Shetlands. They are very fast whales and quite small, so often the sightings are brief. Often they are associated with lots of ice, so generally more are seen the further south you go. Sometimes, they can be quite elusive and aren't seen on all trips.

Burmeister's porpoise were seen on two trips this season from the ship in the first hour of the sailing but they are incredibly difficult to see due to their small size (especially when you are 5-6 storeys above the waterline on the observation deck), plus they hate ships. I have however seen them very well from the trail that follows the coves of Tierra Del Fuego National Park and from the Beagle Channel track on the Eastern side of Ushuaia town.

Southern Elephant seals can be seen at any time but there are typically more abundant in the late season. Antarctic fur seal numbers explode from almost zero in November/December to dozens in Feb and March, especially in the South Shetlands as they return from breeding in South Georgia.

Hourglass Dolphins can be seen in the Drake all year around, anywhere from the deep water South of Cape Horn to the South Shetlands. They do require a significant time commitment on the observation deck to see, as they will typically only be seen for 30-90 seconds as they side swipe the ship and then

immediately head away. Spectacled Porpoise, Risso's and Southern Right Whale dolphins can also be seen but are incredibly rare.



*Hourglass Dolphin Pod with calf, Drake Passage*

Orca can also be seen at any time of year, most typically in the Gerlache Strait (B2 Orca) but they can also be seen in the South Shetlands or in the Drake. Type A and B1 can also be seen in these locations as well. The South American coastal orca type can be seen around Cape Horn or in the Beagle. Type D can be seen anywhere in the Drake or around Cale Horn (usually associated with undersea pinnacles or steep drop-offs) but they are incredibly rare. Again, it helps if you are in the Peninsula from Dec-Feb to get maximise daylight hours to increase the chances of sightings. The quality of the sighting depends on what mood the pod is in, if they are transiting or actively hunting they will likely boost away from the ship and if they are in a playful/curious mood they will happily approach a stopped ship and they will do multiple laps. It seems to be about a 50/50 chance.

Around Cape Horn where the steep continental drop-off occurs is the best place to see Longfin pilot whales. We saw two large pods this season on approach North to Cape Horn, but they can be surprisingly difficult to spot, so

a large time commitment is required to see them.



*Longfin Pilot Whale calf, Cape Horn*

Beaked whales can be seen anywhere in the Drake or on the peninsula. Typically in Antarctic waters it is the Arnoux's or Southern Bottlenose pods. In the Drake Passage additional species could include Strap Toothed, Gray's and a few other rare species. Again, a significant time investment is required to spot them and sightings are usually very brief. It certainly helps if you have a calm Drake Crossing and usually they are spotted close to or directly on top of undersea pinnacles or steep drop-offs so pay attention when the ship is crossing over these areas. Having a camera ready with a good zoom lens is also critical if you want to have a chance to ID them too.



### *Unknown Beaked Whale, Drake Passage*

The common Antarctic pinnipeds (Weddel, Crabeater, Leopard Seals) are typically seen all summer. There are typically more Weddell seals in the first two thirds of the season from November to Feb. Crabeater seals can be seen at any time, usually only a couple per trip but you can significantly increase the chances of sightings (in crazy high numbers) by going South of the Antarctic Circle where there is more sea ice. Leopard seal sightings seem to be slightly lower in the first half of the season and then high in the last half of the season, particularly in February and March when they are hanging around the Penguin colonies and stocking up on young penguins as they leave their colony. This is when Penguin hunts are most likely to be seen.



*Crabeater Seal with Orca/Leopard Seal scars, Antarctic Peninsula*



*Leopard Seal, Antarctica*

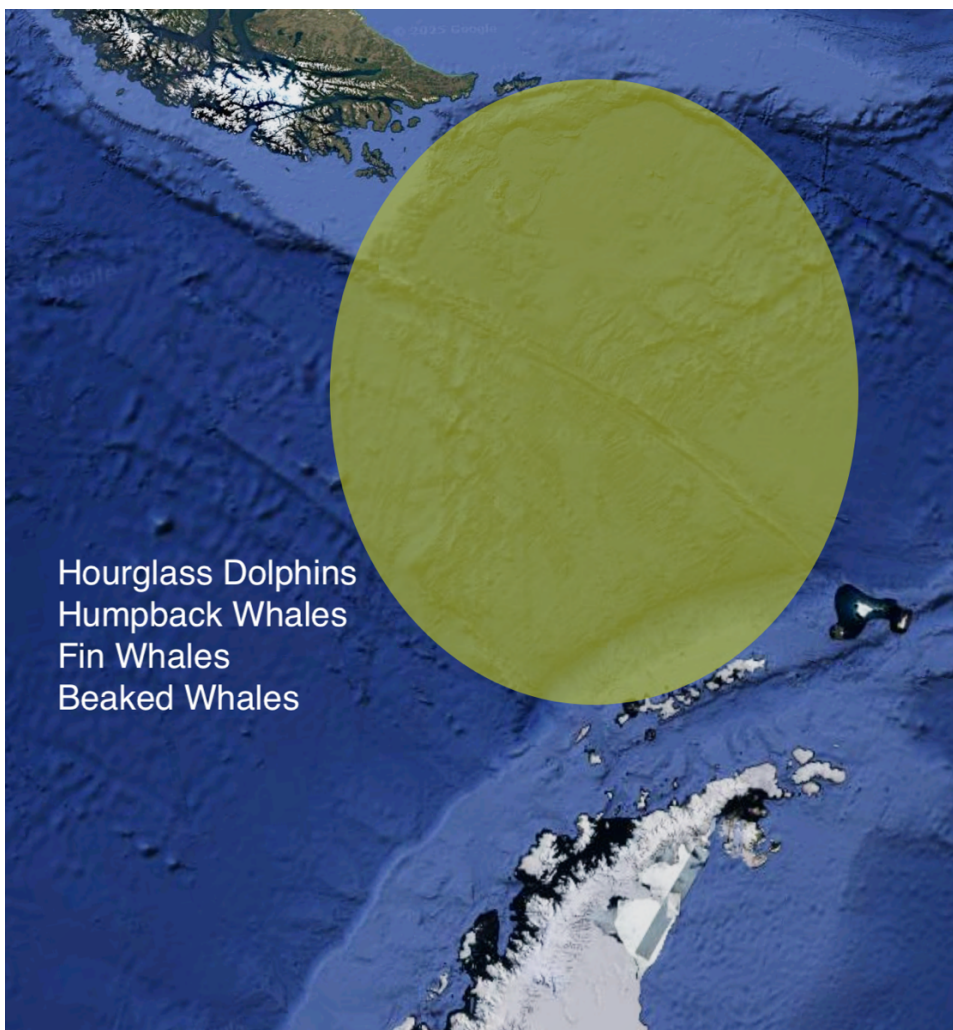
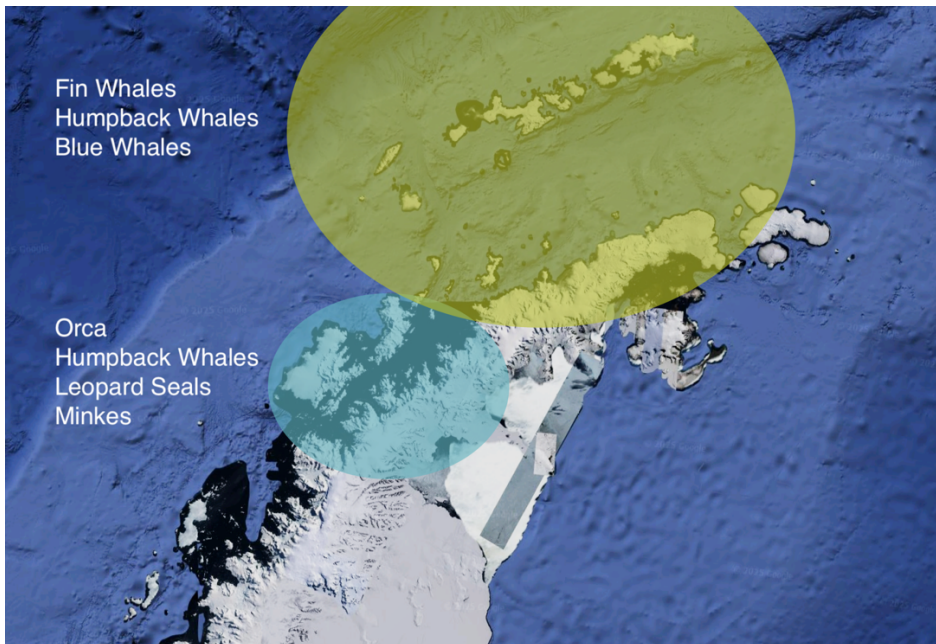
Ross Seals are incredibly rare and typically associated with very thick ice but there are occasionally a few sightings around the peninsula, but usually well south of the circle. Unless you are on an icebreaker or in a helicopter one would be very difficult to find.

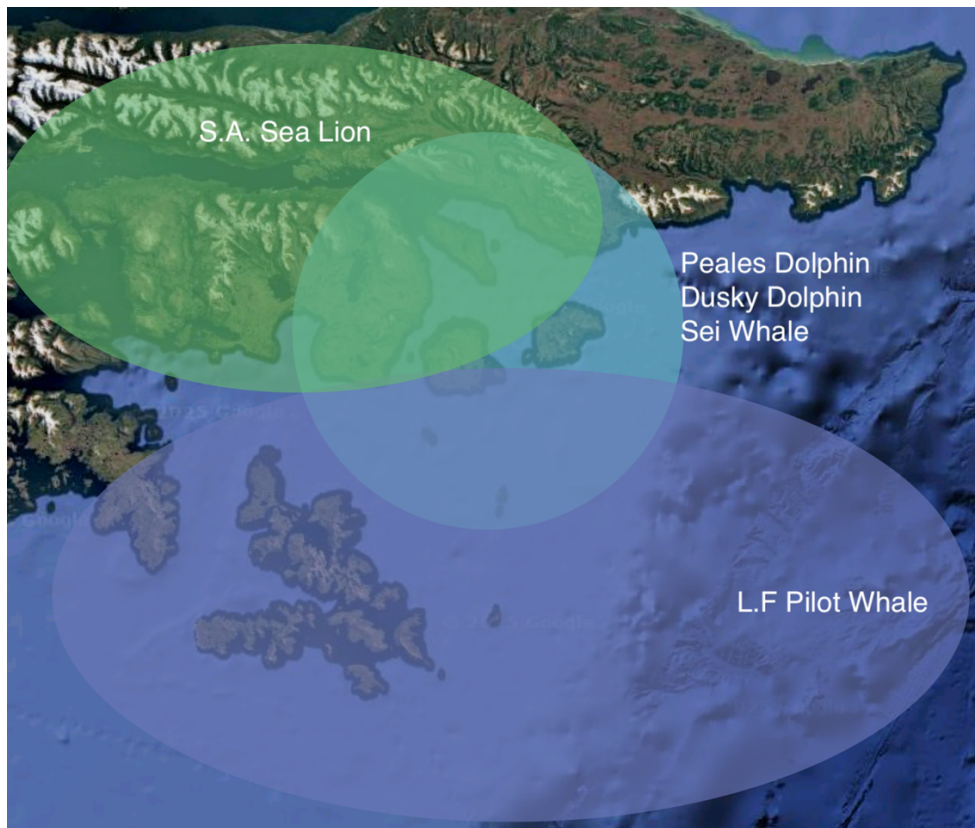
## Sightings dates and numbers

	7-15 Nov	2-11 Dec	11-20 Dec	20-29 Dec	29-5 Jan	5-10 Jan	10-18 Jan	18-25 Jan	18-26 Feb	26-8 Mar	8-17 Mar
<i>No. of Drake Crossings</i>	2	2	2	2	1	0	0	1	2	2	2
Humpback Whale	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
Fin Whale	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XX	X	X		XX	XXXX	XXXX
Sei Whale	X	XXX	XXX	XXX	X					XXXX	XX
Southern Right Whale										X	
Antarctic Minke Whale	X			X	XXX	XX	XXX	X	XX	XX	XX
Longfin Pilot Whale		X								X	
Arnoux's Beaked Whale		X									
Unknown Beaked Whale				X	XX						
Orca	X	X	XXXX	XX	XXX	X	X	XX		XX	
Peale's Dolphin		XX	X		X						
Dusky Dolphin			X	X	X			X	X	X	
Hourglass Dolphin		X	XX						X	X	X
Burmeister's Porpoise									X	X	
South American Sea Lion	XX	XX	XX	XX	X				XXX	XXX	XXX
Antarctic Fur Seal						X	X	X	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
Southern Elephant Seal		X	X	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	X	XX	XXX
Leopard Seal	XX	XX	X	XXXX	XXX	X	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
Weddell Seal	XXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
Crabeater Seal	XX	XX	XX	XXX	X	X	XXXX	X	XX	XX	XXX
<b>Total species</b>	9	13	11	12	13	8	9	8	12	16	11

KEY
XXXX = 4+ sightings
XXX = 3 sightings
XX = 2 sightings
X = 1 sighting

## Rough Guide Maps





I am fortunate enough to heading to the Arctic for the northern hemisphere summer from May to September with Quark so I will do another mammal report for Svalbard, Greenland and the Canadian Arctic at the end of the year!

If you have any more questions I am happy to answer! My Instagram is @ashtonreiser or you can send me a message on the form on my website [ashtonreiser.co.nz](http://ashtonreiser.co.nz)